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## A REPORT ON BETTER SPEECH WEEK

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Before me is lying a huge pile of reports on the observance of the Better Speech Week that marked the opening days of last November. This material has been forwarded to me by the secretary of the Committee on American Speech, because in an unguarded moment I promised to go through these returns and to make a summary of some of their most interesting features for the *English Journal*. Living in a city where Henry Ford has set a plutocratic standard, Miss Crumpton was so extravagant by necessity, she said, as to forward to me this huge bulk by mail; but before I return it to her I shall look up the rates for whole-car freight between Urbana and Detroit. I am glad, however, to have handled and read this immense collection of letters, newspapers and newspaper clippings, programs, handbills, tags, plays, circulars, etc., because they have made me realize how efficiently and tirelessly the Committee has worked in carrying out its great project, and how far-reaching has been the response. None, probably, can tell just how many schools took part in this observance of Better Speech Week, but, doubtless, at a conservative guess the number runs well into the thousands. Of this number only a small per cent made any report, but from the ample body of material these schools furnish we may glean many interesting features of the way in which the campaign was conducted and may gather many hints for following up the work here begun.

The project received excellent support from Governor Allen, of Kansas, who issued a proclamation emphasizing the value of this drive, and from State Superintendent Johnson of Michigan, who sent out a circular to the teachers of Michigan urging the teachers to co-operate in the work. Some of the superintendents in such cities as Milwaukee also gave splendid encouragement, and

the Board of Education in San Francisco sent bulletins and suggestions to every school in the city. In most schools, it appears, the responsibility for the campaign fell on the shoulders of the English department, though occasionally teachers from other departments took the burden, as in Rockford, Illinois, where "the general chairman was a teacher of mechanical drawing; the chairman of the committee on songs and poems was a botany teacher; the chairman of the tag committee was a history teacher, etc. By giving many of the faculty a real part in the work greater interest was secured throughout the school." In the Eastern District High School, of Brooklyn, and elsewhere committees of students were given charge of the campaign; while in other schools each of the four classes became responsible for one day.

In general the schools seem to have followed rather closely the plans proposed in the Guide issued by the National Speech Committee. Many schools took advantage of the collection of posters sent out by the National Committee, and probably a hundred schools have been reached in this way. Of the subjects reported as used by students in their posters the following from Tougaloo, Mississippi, seems one of the best: "Sir Good Speech is rescuing the Queen of Good English from the castle where she was imprisoned by the dragons Ain't and Gointer." In general the art teachers responded very readily and very helpfully in the campaign.

The number of successful yells and slogans was not large. Here are two of the best yells—from the Wilson Normal School, Washington, D. C.:

Better Speech  
Is in the Reach  
Of All      Of Each

Better Speech!                  Better Speech!                  Better Speech!

Three of the original slogans may be here quoted, the first from Buffalo, the second and third from Harrisburg: "Enlist in the American Speech Army!" "Good English is a Good Tonic—Use it." "Halt! Slang is not allowed here."

The number of language creeds was fairly large, and some of them very clever. Here is the ending of one of them:

I believe it is possible to live up to this creed.  
I believe it is worth while.  
I believe I'll try it.

Possibly the best creed was that by Charles Swain Thomas, entitled "My Language: the Language of America" which appeared in a bulletin he prepared for the Cleveland schools. Lack of space forbids its inclusion here, but it is to be hoped that some means may be found of giving this splendid creed a wide publicity.

Of the songs evoked by Better Speech Week many were parodies of current popular melodies, especially of "Blowing Bubbles." Many older patriotic airs appear with new words; one, to the tune of "Maryland," is addressed to Miss Crumpton and begins thus:

Thy clarion call the millions heard  
For a new integrity.

Parodies of "Excelsior," "Little Orphant Annie," poems from *A Child's Garden of Verses*, etc., were numerous and clever. Here is one stanza from a parody on Field's "The Duel," taken from the *Detroit News*:

It seems the two had fought before  
And carried on a terrible war,  
And this is how the fight began;  
The gingham dog was called "I can,"  
And the calico cat, thought 'twas a sin,  
Always went by the name "I kin."  
So Can killed Kin forevermore.

Tags and tag days are frequently mentioned in the reports as offering one of the most interesting features of the campaign. Some of these tags were printed in the national colors and bear such slogans as "Use your Speech for Service," "United in Speech." The tag games were varied; sometimes each pupil was given a certain number of tags and forfeited one to any fellow-pupil for a mistake in grammar or for the use of slang. In other schools the culprit, like another ancient mariner, was obliged to wear a tag denoting his error; and in Rockford, Illinois, each offense involved a fine of one cent. Special detectives frequently watched for offenders. In the Western High School, Washington, D.C., detectives were selected from each class:

These gathered evidence against their classmates, to be used later when the offenders were tried for breaking the laws of good English. This was the more interesting because on certain specific days the detectives were unknown, while on other occasions known detectives worked on unknown days. The trials were held at the end of Good Speech Week.

In some English classes pupils responded to roll call by giving appropriate quotations, and a brief discussion of a few common errors prefaced the regular work of the class. Drills on homonyms, and synonyms, Better English topics for themes, the writing of allegories, etc., also mark the week's work. In many schools special attention was given to pronunciation lists and drills, to breathing exercises, work with tongue twisters, and frequently a speech survey of the class was made and the names of pupils having trouble were handed in to the proper authorities.

Contests were as numerous as they were varied in nature—essay contests and debates, contests in pronouncing, story telling, extemporaneous speaking, the writing of poems, all figure conspicuously in these reports. In Brooklyn the survivors of the local high-school contests in pronunciation met in an interscholastic contest. The method of conducting this final test was unique:

As a climax to a week of speech improvement activities a pronouncing match took place Friday in the Auditorium of the Boys' High School. Words were thrown on a screen and the contestants pronounced them in turn. Each student wore three little flags, one of which he surrendered for each word he mispronounced, and at the fourth error he surrendered himself.

One school reports a pronouncing contest in which dictionaries and dunce caps were the prizes.

The number of plays produced during Better Speech Week would rival that of the leaves of Vallombroso. The theme of *The Burial of Bad English* appealed strongly to adolescent minds in all parts of the country. Perhaps the most elaborate stage production of the week was *The English Truants*, given by one hundred and seventy grammar-school pupils in Detroit under the direction of Miss Clara Beverley. The Venice, California, High School presented *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* as a pageant. At the Tuskegee Institute the two girls who won the spelling match were made conspicuous in the Better Speech Parade which closed the week's exercises:

One girl was mounted on a horse, which was led by a member of the Senior class, while body guards, in costume, marched on each side, protecting "Good English." The other girl was seated on throne, built upon a float. The float was carried by members of her class. She wore a simple crown bearing the title "Our Queen."

Several other school activities deserve more than the passing notice that can be given them here. Such, for example, are the special editions of school papers filled with special articles on the value of good speech, with reports of activities of the week, and with cartoons of varying degrees of merit. In some towns, such as Valparaiso, Indiana, the newspapers gave generously of their space for materials prepared by students. Students of the Davenport, Iowa, High School wrote to various large business houses for their opinions of the value of good English in the business world and received several replies which might well furnish interesting material if another *Guide for Better Speech Week* should be issued. At Muskegon, Michigan, "each pupil was asked to write a criticism of his own speech: voice, slang, errors, etc. The results were very interesting and very sincere."

In many schools the various other departments co-operated most heartily with the department of English. Thus to cite a single instance, each pupil in history at Andover, Massachusetts, "reported on one of the following subjects, using good English, and speaking clearly and slowly: Historical Poems, Historical Stories, Historical Incidents, Lives of Great Men or Women." "The teachers in other departments printed in large type lists of words which they placed in recitation rooms; above these they wrote 'How do you spell these?' or 'How do you pronounce these?'"

Of the extra-mural agencies used in forwarding the campaign the first to deserve mention, perhaps, is the newspaper. Among those featuring the campaign for Better Speech was the *Kansas City Star*, which published a number of the cartoons and posters prepared in the local high schools. The *Detroit News* devoted a part of one of the feature sections of a Sunday issue to the play *The English Truants*, and many papers published editorials dealing with some phase of the use of language. As a whole, however, these editorials were comparatively worthless, though exception to this statement should be made in a few cases, such as that of the editorial on "Living and Dead Language" which appeared in the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*.

In many motion-picture houses Better Speech cartoons were thrown on the screen, and occasionally high-school four-minute

men spoke to the audiences on some phase of the use of language. At Andover, Massachusetts, the teachers "induced the moving-picture manager to put on films of books the pupils had read: one of *Silas Marner*, the other of *A Man without a Country*. He added *Pilgrim's Progress*."

An especial appeal was made in many places to the clubs and the home. Mrs. Katherine Knowles Robbins had already spoken at Peoria before the Illinois Federation of Women's Clubs, and through her efforts the Wisconsin Federation voted \$250 toward the expenses of the Better Speech campaign. Women's Rotary clubs, mothers' clubs, and parent-teacher associations showed their interest in the work in various ways. For example, the "Andover Mothers' Club offered some prizes for best spellers, for the pupils who made fewest mistakes in English in recitation during the week, and for the best posters." One of the schools of that town distributed to the homes hand-dodgers reading thus:

This is American Speech Week.  
Will the members of your household co-operate  
With us by making special effort to use Good  
English all the week?  
We invite you to adopt with us this slogan—  
Better English for Better Americans!

STOWE SCHOOL

Several schools have extended the campaign, making it a Better Speech Year. At Rockford, Illinois, "the gymnasium teacher is now chairman of a committee which is planning an organization of pupils and faculty to follow up what has been gained"; and from these teachers of other subjects "has come the suggestion that minimum requirements for written work in all departments be formulated." The East Aurora, New York, High School is planning to keep the linguistic fires burning by securing outside speakers during the course of the year and by teaching its pupils the words on the lists prepared for the pronunciation contest, while the superintendents of schools in Clarmont County, Ohio, are "formulating a general plan for the purpose of securing Better English throughout the country, not only for one week but for every week, and not only in the school but also in the home, on the street, and in all conversation. The task is a large one, but with the

co-operation of patrons much can be accomplished." From California comes the suggestion that the campaign for 1920 be begun earlier, that San Francisco be made one of the centers for the distribution of literature, and that steps be taken to print the materials gained, especially the plays. This third proposal is echoed in many other reports, one of which suggests that just as there is a series of Good Health Plays, so there should be a series of Good English Plays.

One of the teachers at Muskegon, Michigan, "has a record book for each class which she hands to a different pupil each day. This pupil acts as secretary and checks against each pupil any violations of certain principles or any errors which have been emphasized. At the end of the week the teacher takes time for helping the poorest students. The pupils are interested and have made decided improvement. At the end of the quarter those who have earnestly improved are to be given credit in the mark and vice versa."

The pupils in one Better Speech Club in Ohio were optimistic enough to believe they will rid themselves of "and's" and "a's" by Christmas; and certainly if these clubs are as effective as they are numerous they will accomplish much, for "Speech Leagues," "Do Without Clubs," "Follow up Clubs," and "Societies for the Prevention of Cruelty to English" have been started in many schools. May their work flourish.

In conclusion, a word regarding the value of this whole movement for better speech. If this campaign means simply that a new outlet has been discovered for youthful enthusiasm in making posters, wearing tags, and giving stunt shows, if it means simply a week of linguistic revival with a quick relapse into the old habits and the old, careless attitude toward speech, then indeed the work shall have been in vain. The leaders of this movement have realized that Better Speech Week is but the beginning, and that the path of linguistic righteousness is as steep and difficult as such straight and narrow paths are wont to be. Better Speech Week must give place to Better Speech Year. Are we ready to help make this dream come true?